

# Cuban voices: A case study of English language teacher education

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*This case study uses qualitative research methods and a postcolonial paradigm to listen to the voices of Cuban teacher educators describing how they educate and prepare English language teachers in Cuba.*

*English language teacher education in Cuba includes features that are considered innovative, contemporary and good practice in the Western world. It is contextualised to respect Cuba's sociocultural environment and it makes use of Cuban themes, history, culture and geography. Teacher educators, born and educated in Cuba by Cubans, use a 'pedagogy of tenderness' to build on caring relationships and emphasise institutionalised values of solidarity, collectivism and collaboration.*

*A communicative approach is used to develop the communicative competence of pre-service teachers. Development of pedagogical competence is facilitated through collaboration, peer observation, mentoring, modelling and ongoing professional development. Teacher educators prepare pre-service teachers to undertake extensive field experience and support them in schools as they teach and develop educational research skills.*

*Keywords: Cuba; case study; teacher education; English language teaching; postcolonial; pedagogy*

## INTRODUCTION AND AIM

Several international studies have highlighted Cuba's outstanding record of educational success, which is, in part, attributable to strong teacher education and in-service teacher training programs (Carnoy & Marshall, 2005; Malott, 2007). Gasperini (2000), a specialist in Latin American and Caribbean education, reported to the World Bank:

Cuba is a poor country . . . yet the success of its schools flaunts conventional wisdom. Education in Cuba is entirely public, centrally planned, and free, in a global reform environment of privatization, downscaling of the state role, and cost recovery (p. 14).

Independently of the educational reform policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and excluded from such funding sources, Cuba has developed an alternative education system that accords with Cuban values and socialist principles (MacDonald, 2009). With the rapid global expansion of English as an international language, English language teaching has become a lucrative, multi-national industry. Discrimination in favour of language teachers from English-speaking countries is widespread. This is despite research evidence that, all else being equal, "non-native" speakers of English, that is, those who learnt it as a foreign language, may have a broader range of skills for teaching English (Ellis, 2006, p. 10). An exception to such

discrimination is found in Cuba, where, since the early 1960s, all English language teachers have been locals who learnt English as a foreign language.

Educators in North America and Europe have called for more research into Cuba's teacher training system to explore the reasons for its educational success (Breidlid, 2007; Gomez Castanedo & Giachicchino-Baker, 2010). This article responds to that call, at a time when international research is increasingly focused on the pedagogy and identity of teacher educators (Dinkelman, 2011, p. 322; Murray & Kosnik, 2011, p. 243). The aim of this article is, to focus on the particularity of a group of teacher educators at a pedagogical university in Havana and, through their voices, experiences and skills, describe how they prepare English language teachers using a pedagogy that is contemporary and appropriate to the Cuban context. This study reveals how they educate pre-service teachers to be both communicatively and pedagogically competent English language teachers.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The place of English language in Cuba has changed over time. Cubans have been speaking Spanish since colonisation began in 1510. However, after the defeat of Spain by US forces in 1898, the importance of the English language increased in Cuban society. All Cuban institutions, including schools, were rapidly reorganised to conform to US practices. The school law of the state of Ohio provided the model for Cuba's education system and a US curriculum formed the basis of the new Cuban curriculum (Pérez, 1982, p. 44). All educational reforms during the next decades included English as a compulsory requirement, a period when promotion of the language "had all the characteristics of linguistic imperialism" (Corona & Garcia, 1996, p. 91), whereby widespread discrimination favoured the language of the colonisers at the expense of the colonised (Phillipson, 1997, p. 239). English was used to promote US business and political interests and to maintain "the social stratification that favoured the Cuban elite" who spoke English (Corona & Garcia, 1996, p. 91).

Since the revolution in 1959, English is no longer widely used in everyday Cuban life, (Irizar, 2001). The study of the Russian language increased between 1959 and 1991, however English was always and remains the most studied foreign language in Cuba (Martin, 2007). The need for English language increased following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since that time, the language has become increasingly important for tourism, international relationships, business, medical and scientific research, and technological development, and to support Cuba's international aid missions to developing Anglophone countries in the Caribbean (such as Jamaica and Grenada), in Asia and Oceania (such as Australia and New Guinea) and in Africa (such as Namibia).

During the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the pedagogy of English language teaching in Cuba underwent successive transformations from structural approaches which emphasised grammatical skills to the communicative approach (CA) which emphasises communication skills (Hunter, 1988). CA "involves students in real or realistic communication, where the successful achievement of the communicative task they are performing is at least as important as the accuracy of their language use" (Harmer, 2007, p. 69). There was significant input into these changes from North Americans, such as Marjorie Moore, Neil Naimann and Adrienne Hunter (Hunter, 1988; Irizar Valdes & Chiappy Jhones, 1991; Maclean, Betancourt, & Hunter, 2000).

The sixteen pedagogical universities in Cuba follow a national curriculum for foreign language teacher education which determines the approach used and all major components of the curriculum while allowing for some regional flexibility to respond to local needs (Diaz-Canel Bermúdez, 2011). While the communicative approach remains influential globally, there is also increasing acceptance that it needs to be adapted to the local context, as has happened in Cuba, using principled pragmatism, (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Cuban pedagogy values people working and learning together in a relationship of mutual respect, enhancing community and building “collective social capital” (Carnoy & Marshall, 2005, p. 261). Collaboration and collectivism, in contrast to competition and individualism, were noted as features of Cuban pedagogy during a visit by US educators (Schultz, Tiner, Sewell, & Hirata, 2011) and their observations concurred with an earlier comparative study of secondary students in Melbourne and Havana (Williams, 2006). The emphasis on the affective domain, evident in Cuban pedagogy, has been termed a “pedagogy of tenderness” (*“la pedagogía de la ternura”*) by Turner Martí and Pita Cespedes (2001). The pedagogy of tenderness arose from the educational philosophy implemented in 1961 during the Cuban National Literacy Campaign, and the subsequent Cuban “*Yo, Si Puedo*” and “Yes, I Can” adult literacy programs in many countries. Taken up and developed further in Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 2000), it considers that significant learning requires significant relationships and emphasises the role of the family and community in each student’s education. Teachers are expected to know each student, “their needs, and the material and social conditions of their home lives” and work with them as partners (Lutjens, 2007, p. 185).

A collaborative environment for teacher education, in which peer observation, reflection, action research and professional development are encouraged, leads to improvements in teaching practices (Loughran, 2006). Through collaboration and peer observation, teacher educators may reflect on their own practices, and are more likely to be able to narrow the gap between their teaching intentions and actions (Loughran, 2011). Mentors can help less experienced teacher educators and pre-service teachers by modelling appropriate practices, providing a range of assistance including emotional support, and by encouraging development of professional identity (Loughran, 2006, p. 170-1; Tryggvason, 2009). In Western education systems, “English language teaching (ELT) practicum has come to be recognized as one of the most important aspects of a learner teacher’s education during their language teacher training program” (Farrell, 2008, p. 226). Educational research also strongly supports the benefits for pre-service teachers of learning research skills, and the contribution they make to teaching practices through reflection and professional development (Rust, 2009). The national curriculum in Cuba requires pre-service teachers to spend increasing periods as classroom teachers from the second to the fifth and final year of their university course, as well as undertake educational research into pedagogical issues that they have identified during their practicum.

After teaching English as a foreign language to adults in Australia and having visited Cuba several times since 2002, I volunteered, in 2009, to facilitate collaborative practical teaching workshops with English language teacher educators at a university in Havana. The Cubans participated with warmth and generosity and were passionate about their teaching. I soon realized that the Western educational material I had prepared lacked relevance in the unique Cuban context, whereas the pedagogy of these teacher educators appeared to be contemporary and contextual. It became clear that I ought to listen to their voices and learn from them.

## METHODOLOGY

The qualitative data presented and discussed here are drawn from a descriptive, intrinsic case study of the pedagogy of a group of six English language teacher educators at a large university of pedagogical sciences in Cuba in 2011 (Smith, 2012). I adopted a constructivist epistemology because the participants' views, their context and personal experiences are the essential concerns of the study. For this reason, it is appropriate to use qualitative research methodology and naturalistic enquiry to explore the particularity and complexity of this case, and focus on its intrinsic value rather than testing any specific theory or hypothesis. Given Cuba's history of colonial and neo-colonial oppression, I chose a postcolonial paradigm to give a voice to Cubans to speak for themselves in describing how Cuba uses the English language to meet its own needs and to support Cuban independence. The data consist of records of interviews, collaborative teaching workshops and a focus group. I use pseudonyms for the six case members: Rolando, Juan, Julia, Alfredo, Mercedes and Ofelia.

I used qualitative purposeful sampling by inviting English language teacher educators in the Faculty of Foreign Languages to participate in this case study. I selected the six case members to reflect the diversity among the broader group in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and years and type of teaching experience. Other teacher educators who volunteered, joined the case members in a series of nine practical teaching workshops where they all presented and discussed a variety of activities for teaching English speaking skills. The methods are discussed in greater detail in a Masters thesis (Smith, 2012, Chapter 3).

I used a naturalistic approach (Stake, 1995) so as to pay attention to all raw data. The aim of data analysis was to recognise and preserve the multiple views within the case. I used NVivo 9 (Bazeley, 2007) for data storage and coding. The research design does not permit statistically valid generalisations from this case to the broader population; however it does reveal insights into the pedagogy of one group of teacher educators, and may be a starting point for future research. Stake (1995, p. 85) states that it is possible to "learn much that is general from single cases".

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I iteratively analysed raw data from audio records of interviews with case members, before and after they participated in nine collaborative teaching workshops and a follow-up focus group to identify and explore emergent patterns and themes. Themes, which emerged strongly from the data are:

### **Communicative competence**

### ***Communication skills***

As Rolando states "We are not teaching our students to talk, we are teaching our students to communicate" (Rolando, Focus Group, 260511). He emphasises the central place of communication in language teacher training in Cuba: "language is communication; learn it by communicating and teach it by communicating" (Rolando, Interview 2, 270511). He distinguishes between speaking and communicating, because the latter involves a broad

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range of other grammatical, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, discourse and strategic skills – as well as speaking (Bagaric & Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 2007, p. 97-99).

Rolando, the oldest of the case members, who studied before the CA was established in Cuba, considers that CA, with its emphasis on communication and the context of learning, is superior to structural approaches used when he learnt English 40 years ago (Rolando, Interview 1, 270411). He states that students no longer spend a lot of time being taught grammar and language structures, but focus instead on realistic communicative situations, useful chunks of language and on socio-cultural factors, such as register (e.g. the level of formality and appropriate lexis or vocabulary). While grammatical accuracy, form and pronunciation are still important, Rolando says they are studied in a realistic social and cultural context in which emphasis is first and foremost on being understood by the target audience.

Juan emphasises the importance of teaching basic conversation skills, such as taking turns to talk and active listening. He also believes that pre-service teachers need to learn different strategies, like circumlocution, to call on when conversing in English: “If you do not know how to say a word in this way, try to do it another . . . find a strategy to say what you want to say” (Juan, Interview 1, 250411).

Teacher educators use classroom activities that are typical of CA around the world, being student-centred and often involving small-group work. Julia describes how she begins her 1<sup>st</sup> Year “Integrated English Practice” (IEP) classes with an “ice-breaker” activity to warm up the pre-service teachers, then elicits information from their knowledge about a particular theme for the lesson which relates to a Unit in the Cuban course book, then “pre-teaching” new vocabulary using photos and other realia. She also involves her students in a range of interactive tasks, including singing, discussions, role-plays and simulations (Julia, Interview 1, 270411).

Juan and other teacher educators describe how pre-service teachers practice speaking by working together in pairs and small groups, and using role plays, dialogues and a range of games.

That’s the way we practise . . . questions and answers, games . . . I am used to playing games with my students. Lots of them. They like that . . . and it is unbelievable how they talk and how they interact (Juan, Interview 1, 250411).

So, an English language classroom is a site of activity, fun, interaction and talking—frequently in small groups. In general, pre-service teachers use only English; however, the fact that they share the same first language (L1) with each other and the teacher educator means that Spanish translation can be used occasionally where it helps language learning.

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Topical themes and issues, preferably suggested by pre-service teachers, are most effective for stimulating discussions in English classes (Ofelia, Interview 1, 260411). Daily challenges faced by Cubans are among the topics pre-service teachers want to discuss, including the vagaries of public transport; teenage pregnancy and safe sex; over-crowded, multi-generational, living conditions; intermittent interruptions to water and power; and employment.

We have talked about transportation – which was very good for them to discuss. We also talk about jobs, discussing jobs and what their parents do and how they do it. How is the employment situation in our country these days? How is it different in other countries? Also the housing situation—it's something they like to talk about (Julia, Interview 1, 270411).

In this quote, Julia explains that pre-service teachers engage in discussions when topics are relevant to them. Pre-service teachers are also interested in debating broader international issues, such as global warming, threatened species and international relationships. Mercedes and Juan emphasise the primacy of Cuban culture in ELTE “because mostly we teach English on the basis of Cuban culture and the history of Cuba” (Juan, Interview 1, 250411). Alfredo explains that in previous years, when US course books were used, “everything was related to the US environment” and pre-service teachers were unable to identify readily with texts and themes from cultures so different from their own (Alfredo, Interview 1, 260411).

For the last 3 years, it's been a constant issue, that point of working on a syllabus which includes the Cuban context. I mean to design a method basing the context on the national environment, so it makes the teaching more interesting for the students. So the students feel reflected in what they're learning (Alfredo, Interview 1, 260411).

Alfredo explains how introduction of a Cuban ELTE course book, *Integrated English Practice 1* by Enriquez O'Farrill et al. (2010) in the last few years has allowed teacher educators to provide a communicative English course based on Cuban history, geography and culture where pre-service teachers can identify more closely with the scenarios presented to them (Alfredo, Interview 1, 260411). For example, overseas travel is not a familiar experience for most Cubans who have never travelled outside the country, nor even travelled far within the country. It is, therefore, more appropriate, as Mercedes suggests, to use examples that reflect the reality of life for Cubans.

Instead of using role-plays like “you are going abroad” or “you are an exchange student”, I use other things, like you are going to Villa Clara, OK. Or you're a student from Santiago de Cuba and you are visiting a friend in Havana (Mercedes, Interview 1, 250411).

Notwithstanding the use of *Integrated English Practice 1* (Enriquez O'Farrill et al., 2010), teacher educators and pre-service teachers still value exposure to other cultures and draw from international sources. “We use other materials like *Headway* (UK), *Enterprise* (UK), *Spectrum* (US) etc.” (Mercedes, Interview 1, 250411). These materials represent a rich source of communicative exercises and activities that vary the classroom experience of pre-service teachers and introduce different ideas from the cultures of other countries, particularly the UK and US.

### ***Language and culture***

Many Cubans, particularly youth, are attracted to Western popular culture, including music, videos (and DVDs), sport, dress and the slang of different subcultures, particularly from the US. With reference to pre-service teachers, Alfredo commented: “I think that they are pretty influenced by the American way of life in general” (Alfredo, Interview 1, 260411).

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Pre-service teachers enjoy cross-cultural comparisons and the basic ELTE curriculum includes a course on “History of the Culture of English-speaking Peoples” and another on “Literature of the Anglophone Caribbean”. Case members believe that comparative studies help pre-service teachers to develop pragmatic competence and enhance their understanding of the relationship between culture and language.

They love that, they love culture and cultural issues are important for them (Ofelia, Focus Group, 260511).

Juan commented that while English is taught mainly on the basis of Cuban culture and history, pre-service teachers are introduced to the cultures and history of Great Britain, the US, the Caribbean countries and Canada (Juan, Interview 1, 250411). Language represents and reflects the values and ethics of the associated culture and Alfredo believes that “every time you teach a language you are teaching part of the culture of the place of origin of such a language”. (Alfredo, Interview 1, 260411). Ofelia and Alfredo believe that pre-service teachers need to gain not just linguistic competence but also a sound socio-cultural understanding of English language use. Ofelia and other case members are concerned that, in general, Cubans tend to express their feelings and thoughts with less tact or regard for social status than other English speakers and consider it is important for pre-service teachers to appreciate these cultural differences and enhance their pragmatic skills (Ofelia, Focus Group, 260511). One way of achieving this is for teacher educators to model culturally appropriate behaviour; for example, Mercedes wants to be more diplomatic in the ways that she corrects her students.

So, it's like social behaviour in the language is very important. It's like psychologically-speaking you are going to be a different person because maybe in Spanish you can say “You're wrong. That's not the way it is.” But in English you can't. So you have to be more of a diplomat. OK, you have to be more polite (Mercedes, Focus Group, 260511).

The case members reveal how the communicative approach to English Language Teaching has been contextualised to make it more relevant and engaging for pre-service teachers. They also note that their students enjoy cross-cultural comparisons and learning the pragmatic skills needed to communicate effectively in intercultural and transnational contexts. Pre-service teachers are also educated to develop their *pedagogical competence*. Some salient features of ELTE pedagogy emerged from the data and are highlighted here.

### **Pedagogical competence**

The “pedagogy of tenderness” suffuses all ELTE pedagogy, whereby teacher educators act as partners with pre-service teachers, trusting, empowering and stimulating them. The relationship between educators and students is affectionate and, in typical Cuban manner, overtly physical, with frequent touches and embraces, from the Dean of the Faculty to first-year pre-service teachers. Ofelia explains that her role is to establish, in her classroom, a culture of trust and mutual respect in which students are not afraid to make mistakes, and in which educator and student work collaboratively as “partners in the classroom” (Ofelia, Focus Group, 260511).

### ***Collaboration***

Collaboration occurs between teacher educators, between pre-service teachers, and between teacher educators and pre-service teachers. Teacher educators participated collaboratively in practical workshops organised as part of this study.

Everybody had the chance to work in teams and to collaborate and work in cooperation with all the participants, which is really nice. If you know something and you feel like that something is going to help others, so the best thing to do is to share that information with other people (Juan, Interview 2, 260511).

Juan commented on the importance in ELTE of teaching values that are integral to Cuban culture, particularly “of solidarity, of friendship, of cooperation and the like” (Juan, Interview 2, 260511).

The values that we have decided to foster in the students, from different levels from Primary School, Junior High, so they are institutionalised, and they are the ones that are belonging to our system (Juan, Interview 1, 250411).

Juan clarifies that while these “institutionalised” values of solidarity, friendship and cooperation are not exclusive to Cuba, they are fundamental to Cuban society and Cuban pedagogy.

### ***Peer observation***

Peer observation is the norm for case members. They expect to observe other teacher educators, and be observed, and to discuss (or “debate”) their observations and provide feedback (Juan, Interview 1, 250411). Feedback helps teacher educators to critically examine their own teaching and compare their beliefs about teaching and learning to their actual classroom practices. Several case members commented on the benefit gained from observing other teacher educators and of being observed.

We learn from everybody ... I think that is the way it works ... (Juan, Interview 1, 250411).

Juan, the Principal Teacher for 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Integrated English Practice (IEP), who coordinates the other five 2<sup>nd</sup> Year IEP lecturers, enjoys having younger teacher educators observe his lessons, and finds that both they and he learn from the discussions which follow: “Because always, after these lessons, observations, we have a debate, a methodological debate” (Juan, Interview 1, 250411). Julia feels that peer observation contributes to a sense of unity among her colleagues (Julia, Interview 1, 270411). The case members consider that peer observation helps them to reflect on and modify their practices and hence contributes to their ongoing professional development.

### ***Mentoring and professional development***

Mentoring by more experienced teacher educators is regarded as an integral part of professional development.

We have one day, Tuesdays, to attend meetings, but within the meetings we have preparations, we prepare lessons, and do many other activities to prepare to face the week. And we are guided or led most of the time by experienced teachers (Ofelia, Interview 1, 260411).

One day per week is allocated for professional development, planning and coordination, and it provides opportunities for younger, less experienced teacher educators to be mentored by more experienced teacher educators. All case members feel that they were well supported in the early years of their careers by experienced mentors and role models. Alfredo, one of the younger teacher educators values his relationship with a mentor whom he has known for many years.

I think it is a very positive attitude – the one that the institution assumes towards young professors (teacher educators) or professors in general. Usually when you teach a subject, you are always close to a professor that has more experience in such a field (Alfredo, Interview 1, 260411).

Ofelia also values the opportunity to learn from more experienced teacher educators and takes every opportunity to observe their classes (Ofelia, Interview 1, 260411).

### ***Experiential learning: Practicum***

Experiential learning within ELTE, which occurs within primary and secondary schools, includes practicum and research, and occupies just over 50 percent of time allocated in the curriculum over the five-year university degree. As pre-service teachers, case members began teaching their own English language class in schools in the second year of their University studies, with an increasing teaching load until they were teaching four days per week in their fifth and final year. They were not relieving a regular teacher but were the responsible class teachers, each having an experienced teacher in the school to serve as their mentor, available to give advice and support.

### ***Experiential learning: Research***

Cuban pre-service teachers are expected to complete two research projects during their university training. They choose projects that focus on pedagogical issues, which they have identified while undertaking teaching practicum in schools. The issue is expressed as a scientific problem and a hypothesis is stated which can be tested systematically by gathering observable, empirical, measurable evidence. Conclusions from the research projects lead to recommendations to improve educational outcomes. Teacher educators prepare pre-service teachers to undertake their research projects by providing lectures and discussions on educational research methods, and providing mentoring support during research design, data collection, analysis and reporting.

If a student during their whole course, is unable to get over 4 points as a grade (out of 7), he has to sit for a government exam or test. But if you get 4 or more, you have the possibility to present your diploma paper (Rolando, Interview 1, 270411).

If their progress is satisfactory in the first years of the course, the opportunity is given to pre-service teachers to submit a formal “diploma paper” on their final major educational research project – which is valued by them. The case members describe how they maintain caring and respectful relationships with pre-service teachers and work as partners with them in the classroom where they model effective teaching practices and serve as mentor, emotional support and ethical role model. Cuban teacher educators include, in their teaching practices, a range of features which are consistent with institutionalised Cuban values and which also accord with recent studies on effective teacher education in Western contexts (Loughran, 2011).

## CONCLUSIONS

This case study focuses on the particularities of a group of six Cuban teacher educators at a large teacher education university in Havana and brings to light some salient aspects of English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) in Cuba. The results are of interest internationally because Cuba is, perhaps, the only country where English is taught only by non-native speakers, that is, Cubans who learnt English as a foreign language, and because the education system in Cuba is at odds with neoliberal reform policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and thus provides an alternative model to that found in other Latin American and Caribbean countries.

In this study, Cuban teacher educators speak for themselves to explain how Cuban English language teacher education uses a communicative approach and is contextualised to ensure relevance to the lives of pre-service teachers, and to respect Cuban values, culture, history and geography. Cuban teacher education values people learning about teaching and teaching about learning in a relationship of affection and mutual respect. This “pedagogy of tenderness” emphasises a caring culture in which the family and community are seen as significant partners with the university and school; and teacher educators and pre-service teachers are partners in the classroom.

Notwithstanding that the pedagogy of ELTE in Cuba has developed relatively independently of many Western influences, it includes features which are generally regarded as contemporary, innovative and good practice in language teacher education. They include an emphasis on the affective as well as the cognitive domain, collaboration, continuous professional development, peer observation and mentoring, modelling of good practices, and a high percentage of time allocated to experiential learning by pre-service teachers, including both practical teaching and educational research.

Further research is needed to clarify the extent to which these results represent Cuban ELTE more widely; and the effectiveness of the system in preparing English language teachers with high levels of pedagogical and communicative competence. As ELTE is only one part of English Language Teaching in Cuba, further study is warranted of other components, such as the English Language television classes in *Universidad Para Todos* that are broadcast nationally each week, and the popular, widespread evening classes for working adults.

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